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The techniques used to collect data on the dominant speech patterns and verbal expressions of elementary school children are described as a means of systematizing oral language instruction. Specific recurring errors discovered in children's communication are discussed: the failure to focus on a major point, to support ideas, and to clarify questions; the inability to differentiate between ideas or to subordinate one idea to another; a lack of adequate description; and the tendency to use a stereotyped vocabulary. It is proposed that these errors can be diagnosed and treated in the classroom through the use of small instructional groups, audiovisual devices, and experience charts. (JB)

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JAYNE ANNE DELAWTER
AND MAURICE J. EASH

Focus on Oral Communication

In the literature and in practice the improvement of oral language has received little attention in the full scope of the language arts program. Reading, seen by many as the key to academic success, is emphasized heavily in each grade of school. Spelling also has a period set aside specifically for its study, and handwriting usually is given particular attention through a period of formal instruction. Creative writing, though not a major part of the curriculum, nevertheless, is often found in extensive units throughout the elementary years. Comparatively then, it can be seen that development of oral communication skills has been seriously neglected in relationship to the time spent in these other areas. The tragedy of this neglect is further compounded when one considers the time spent by individuals in the areas of language arts, reading, spelling, writing, and oral communication, with the latter accounting for more of the communication process than the sum total time in other areas.

With this apparent lack of emphasis in formal oral language instruction, it is inescapable that many children's ability to handle oral communication is poorly developed. Although outwardly few children have little problem communicating with other people, an analysis of language reveals repetitions, disorganized explanations, and lack of focus in ideas; all of which are a handicap to communicator and listener alike.

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The approach to oral language instruction suggested in this article is an outcome of a broader study in the area of linguistic analysis of patterns of speech.[1] In this study a sample of children's language was gathered and analyzed for the structure of the language and expressions of authoritarianism. Working with this data the authors discovered common errors in oral language which would serve as a basis for oral language instruction in the classroom. The techniques used in the study can be employed in the classroom as a teacher seeks to analyze her students' speech for specific errors or problems in oral language.

In obtaining a language sample, the authors planned a situation where children were encouraged to speak freely. A method which promotes fluency in speech is the use of unfinished stories as a stimulus for oral response. Stories such as the "Anderson Incomplete Stories"[2] present a conflict situation between adults and children which the respondent must resolve in some way. An example of one of these stories is titled "The Missing Money" story. In it, a teacher finds that fifty cents has disappeared from her desk. She doesn't know what happened to it. In the interview the child is asked, "What happened to the money?" "What does the teacher do?" "How does the teacher feel?"

[1] Jayne Anne DeLawter, *A Study of Language Patterns and Expressions of Authoritarianism in Workingclass Children*, unpublished honors thesis. Ball State Teachers University, May, 1964.
[2] Harold H. Anderson and Gladys L. Anderson, "Anderson Incomplete Stories," mimeograph, Michigan State University, 1959.

This type of story is desirable for several reasons. First of all, it gives the child a definite focus for his reply. It also encourages an uninterrupted flow of speech which is more easily analyzed than scattered statements in response to general questioning. Aside from the linguistic content of the responses to these stories, much can also be learned about the child's cultural background and value system from a content analysis of the responses. The authors have found these stories to be of high interest to all children and to encourage lucid expression.

In order to preserve the speech samples of the children, tape-recorded interviews are essential. Previous research finds that note-taking obtains only a selective 10 percent to 20 percent of free flowing responses. In contrast, a taped interview captures the full response, retains the emotional tone and spontaneity of the child, and provides a listening sample which can be reviewed when desired. Certain precautions were observed in the interviews in order to obtain reliable samples. Interviews were done individually in a school setting familiar to the students. Initial curiosity about the tape recorder was satisfied by a brief discussion, a previous experience with the machine. In this case since the interviewer was someone other than the classroom teacher, rapport with the students was built by conversation, observation, and participation in classroom procedure prior to the interview.

After the data had been collected in the interviews, the responses were typed on protocols, using a format that captured as accurately as possible the student's responses. A sample from a protocol is reproduced below.

Interviewer: What does the teacher do?
Respondent: She . . . she would just . . . she would ask 'em . . . they was doin their arithmetic, she could just ask 'em to stop for a minute and she could say that . . . the money was gone off her desk. And if somebody had it, they could give it back to her. And nobody say nothing . . . maybe who got it would have a smile on their face or she can tell.
I. How does the teacher feel?
R. Sad . . . and mad. Because no-one tell her who got it.
I. What will she do then?
R. Go around the room—look in the desks and then if nobody had it, she can say—look in their shoes. And if she still don't find it, I don' know.
I. Can you think of an ending for this story?
R. Ending of it? She feel real—very sad. She wished—she wished that she would know who'd—who were—who it was.

Linguistic studies involving elaborate analysis can be done of the prepared protocol.[3]

However, this linguistic approach does not indicate how a child can organize and handle ideas; it primarily outlines the dominant patterns in his speech.

To improve the child's language in terms of handling ideas, the teacher needs to look for basic errors in oral communication. Some of the errors which are critical to more mature speaking are:

1. *Failure to focus*—The ability to focus on the major point may relate to the type of stimulus given. However, the failure to focus seems to be related to immaturity of speech habits or inadequate experience in extended conversations. Failure to focus carries over into adult conversations which, when recorded, reflect tangency and indirection.[4] The ability to focus can be tested

[3] Ruth G. Strickland, "The Language of Elementary School Children; Its Relationship to the Language of Reading Textbooks and the Quality of Reading of Selected Children," *Bulletin of the School of Education*, Indiana University, 38 (July, 1962).
[4] Anselm Strauss and Leonard Schatzman, "Cross-Class Interviewing: An Analysis of Interaction and Communitive Styles," *Human Organization Research*, edited by R. N. Adams and J. J. Preiss. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsy Press, 1960, pp. 205-213.

by using specific or general questions. For example, a direct question, such as "Why did the children run?" elicits a different type of response than a general directive, such as "Name three reasons why the children ran."

2. *Poor organization of ideas*—This error relates quite closely to the failure to focus. Many children begin speaking before they think through any organization of a response or before they examine the intent of the question or questioner. This leads to unnecessary repetition and rambling in the response. This is seen in the following interview sample:

I. Tell me more about the teacher.
R. O.K. And then the teacher . . . And then he takin up lunch money and this boy was poor and anyway he had to get his book rent paid. He had an uncle and he was a movie star and. . . .

3. *Failure to clarify questions*—Again this error comes from instantaneous response with no thought about what the questioner had asked. Misunderstandings often arise from hasty replies which have little relationship to the question at hand. The protocols reflect lack of questioning before responding, or any interaction which would draw the questioner out—literally no active effort to determine the intent of the questioner. Frequently the response does not seem to fit the inquiry, and the responder seems insensitive to the questioner.

I. How would that person feel?
R. She couldda said that they shouldn'ta been playing in the yard.

4. *Lack of supporting ideas*—This mistake is another characteristic of immature speakers. Common to this mistake is using a general blanket statement as sufficient to prove a point or to express their position. Opinion and fact are confused in presentation. Mastery of this phase of oral communication is crucial to critical thinking and can be taught quite early in the elementary grades. Getting students to question the support for a position is essential to critical thinking on any social problem. An error of this type can be seen in the following protocol illustrating the mistaken belief that relationship means friendship, where the story implied rather poor relationships between father and son.

I. How do you know John and his father are good friends?
R. Cause that's his son.
R. Cause it's his father.

5. *Inadequate descriptions*—The ability to visualize and describe a scene, person, or attribute takes a high degree of awareness and mental acquity. A contributor to clear and precise detail-giving is considerable past experience in reading and analysis of reading for description. However, oral language ability will not necessarily develop from reading, if attention is not directed to the function of description. Many immature speakers tend to personalize the description if they lack words to express the ideas they hold.

In a discussion of a story involving bicycles, the substitution of personalizing the response for adequate description is seen:

I. What is a skinny wheel?
R. It's a big bike—handbrakes on it. Some of 'em have hand brakes, some have foot brakes. I like hand brakes; you don't have to put your feet back.

6. *Lack of subordination*—The use of subordination to divide run-on units into more precise sentences is one mark of a mature speaker. Subordination is a problem with many children as they run many sentences and ideas together. This is seen in the following example:

> And then they went through it again and their mother was mad. And then they go out and play football and they wouldn't go around the house no more cause the window might get broke again and they had to stay in. And then they don't want no more whippings cause it hurts.

As the response shows, this child failed to differentiate between the level of ideas. In an attempt to maintain fluency the child has used a series of conjunctions to combine unrelated ideas.

7. *Stereotyped vocabulary*—The vocabulary of a child seems to be quite heavily related to his environment. An abundance of first-hand experiences is a major factor in the use of a variety of words. Children rarely used words which have no personal relevance to their own lives. Therefore, if actual experiences are not adequate, and if books or other vicarious experiences are not provided, a child's vocabulary remains that of his immediate environment, and words do not carry precise connotation. The lack of definitiveness of descriptions and stereotyping in description of human behavior is evident in the following description of a teacher's actions.

> She look in her desk and look in her pocketbook again and look in the kids' desk and pockets and look in her pocket and coat pockets until she finds it.

No claim is made that these categories are mutually exclusive, and the teacher should not become bogged down in attempting to maintain a tidy classification scheme. A gross lumping of errors, however, does give a starting point for working with children on oral communication.

Approaches to Language Improvement

After the basic errors in the children's expression have been identified and studied, the teacher is then faced with the most crucial question in the improvement of the oral language of her students—how will she use the information found in the language analysis to best approach the problem of her students? Some suggestions for beginning work are given here.

1. Small group instruction is essential for oral language development. It is advantageous to both the teacher and the student. The teacher can focus specific problems in one group and concentrate on individual communication errors. Also, more important in a small group, each child can get experience in speaking and listening. He can practice new patterns with the teacher's guidance until the patterns become almost automatic. Furthermore, the student's level of sensitivity to language can be developed without the undue embarrassment often found in speaking and being corrected in the larger class.

2. The use of devices to help the children see and/or hear their own speech patterns can be exciting and profitable. Tape recorders offer one method in this approach. The teacher and students can listen to their own conversations and analyze oral language errors. Also, with some training, students can analyze their conversations and class discussions along the lines of the analysis in this paper.

3. Another method incorporating the children's own language is the extensive use of experience charts, even in the intermediate grades, providing teachers use the children's language. This approach involves the children as they compose stories, poems, or conversational dialogues. The content of such compositions is of immediate relevance to their lives and maintains a high degree of interest. It also allows the children to analyze their own speech patterns as a part of their language arts work.

If improvement of oral communication is to be effective, the teacher must have a

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program that provides for an analysis of basic errors. After discovery of the basic errors, a systematic program of instruction must be provided which sensitizes children and provides opportunity to learn better systems of expression. Improvement in oral communication is not fortuitous, although present instructional patterns have leaned heavily upon the "improvement by accident approach." The framework described in this article which evolved from a research study, provides a systematic approach and places the teaching of oral language upon a more secure base. There is further reason to believe that improvement in performance in oral language will carry over into the other language arts areas of reading, writing, and listening.

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